

# The Pronunciation of Classical Latin

## Letter sounds

Each of the five vowels has a long and a short version. Long vowels carry macrons (**ā, ē, ī, ō, ū**). You will find macrons marked here, but not in standard texts of Latin literature. A macron does not signal any stress or extra force for the syllable—although it may coincide. (See ‘Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse’ in the document alongside this one: *An Introduction to Latin Verse*).

- a** short ‘a’ sound, between the ‘u’ in *cup* and the ‘a’ in *cap*; as in *ă-ha!*
- ā** long as in *fāther*
- ae** somewhere between *fine* and *pain*; the latter was the sound in spoken Latin, certainly after the classical period and probably before it<sup>1</sup>; scholars cannot entirely agree over the classical sound
- au** as in *house*; in speech tendency towards Latin **ō**
- b** as in English (**bs** and **bt** are pronounced ‘ps’ and ‘pt’)
- c** as in *cat* (not *chair* or *ceiling*)
- ch** like English ‘k’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
- d** as in English
- e** (short) as in *met*
- ē** (long) as in *may*
- ei** can be two syllables, e.g. **de-ī** (*gods*); the diphthong ‘ei’ (i.e. single syllable) as in **deinde** (*next*) is similar to *reign*
- eu** usually two syllables as in **meus**; the diphthong ‘eu’ (i.e. single syllable) as in **heu** (*alas*) is two sounds run together ‘e-oo’
- f** as in English, always soft
- g** similar to a hard English ‘g’ (never as in *George*); in certain words less closure ... a fading sound in **magister**, **fugit**, **ego**

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<sup>1</sup> ‘classical’ – broadly c. 60BC – AD130 (From Catullus to Juvenal); the traditional definition is much narrower (Cicero, Caesar, Sallust and at a pinch Livy)

<b>gn</b>	at the beginning of a word as ‘n’ (the <b>g</b> is like English ‘k’ in <i>knee</i> ); ‘ngn’ in the middle of a word is between <i>hangnail</i> and <i>Bolognese</i>
<b>h</b>	as in English, although there was a tendency to ignore initial <b>h</b> in speech
<b>i</b>	a short vowel, as in <i>lip</i>
<b>ī</b>	a long vowel, as in <i>keep</i>
<b>i</b>	a consonant (sometimes written as a ‘j’) like English ‘y’. In some words the vowel and consonant would have been vocalised similarly: e.g. <b>mulier</b> (vowel) and <b>etiam</b> (consonant); the consonant-vowel distinction mattered in verse which was regulated by the flow of syllables (the vocalic <b>i</b> in <b>mulier</b> is a syllable by itself, whereas the consonantal <b>i</b> in <b>etiam</b> is not)
<b>l</b>	as in English
<b>m</b>	as in English at the beginning or in the middle of words; a final ‘m’ is a fading sound which should be pronounced with the lips open, as a nasalisation of the preceding vowel
<b>n</b>	as in English, except below
<b>nf</b>	a preceding vowel is always long ( <b>īnferō</b> )
<b>ng</b>	as in <i>anger</i> (not <i>hangar</i> )
<b>ns</b>	a preceding vowel is always long ( <b>īnsula</b> ); the <b>n</b> is nasalised and less solid than an English ‘n’ (closer to <i>instigate</i> than in <i>inspect</i> )
<b>o</b>	as in <i>not</i>
<b>ō</b>	as in <i>note</i> (as pronounced by Scots and Welsh)
<b>oe</b>	as in <i>boil</i> or as a Scotsman might say the name <i>Roy</i>
<b>p</b>	as in English but with quicker completion and less ‘h’
<b>ph</b>	as in ‘p’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
<b>qu</b>	as in <i>quit</i> , although there is an argument for assuming less closure and a more aspirated sound, between ‘kw’ and ‘hw’
<b>r</b>	always trilled with the tip of the tongue
<b>s</b>	as in <i>gas</i> (never voiced as in <i>has</i> )
<b>t</b>	as in English but with quicker completion and less ‘h’
<b>th</b>	as in ‘t’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
<b>u</b>	as in <i>pull</i>
<b>ū</b>	as in <i>pool</i>
<b>ui</b>	usually two syllables ( <b>graduī</b> , <b>fuī</b> , <b>cui</b> , etc.); in a few words, a diphthong like French ‘oui’ (e.g. <b>huic</b> )
<b>v</b>	consonantal <b>v</b> is sometimes written as a <b>u</b> ; in 1st century BC like an English ‘w’ (Cicero, Catullus, Virgil, etc.); but developed to a ‘v’ sound possibly as early as Ovid (end of 1 <sup>st</sup> century BC).

- x** as in English  
**y** (short) as in French *tu*  
**y** (long) as in French *sur*  
**z** as in English

With double-letters extend the sound of the doubled-up consonant

**currus, reddere, posse, committere, supplicium**

For more on pronunciation, quantity, stress, and an introduction to the metres of classical poetry, see the document alongside this one: *An Introduction to Latin Verse*.

### *Exercise*

Say aloud:

agenda	deus	īnsula	mēnsam	recipe
bonus	ego	laudāre	pater	septem
circus	equus	magister	pervāsīt	tempus fugit
deinde	ignis	māter	puellae	virginēs